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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: SECULARISM CALLED INTO QUESTION AS GOVERNMENT PLANS CONSTRUCTION OF CHURCH AND MOSQUE

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Controversial GOM decisions to use taxpayer money to fund the construction of an Orthodox church in the main city square of Skopje, and to reconstruct a mosque in Tetovo, have sparked political gamesmanship and debate on preserving state secularism. Concerns about the impact of the decision on inter-ethnic relations and the government budget have temporarily taken a back seat to dissonance within the ethnic Albanian community and among its political parties on the appropriate response to the decision. While motives behind the government push to fund the church and the mosque reconstruction are being debated, these potentially extra-constitutional decisions have resulted in protests invoking the name of Mother Teresa, and opposition party pleas for Vatican intercession. End Summary.

Murky Details -- Decided Behind Closed Doors

¶2. (SBU) A January 22 closed-door government meeting resulted in a controversial decision, based on a proposal personally submitted by PM Gruevski, to fund the construction of an Orthodox church in the main city square of Skopje. There is some question about whether the decision was unanimously agreed by all the cabinet ministers present, as asserted by a government spokesperson at a press conference on the issue, or was simply presented as an informational item to the ministers and then recorded as a decision of the government.

¶3. (SBU) An international tender for bids for the design and construction of the church has been opened and will close in late March. Publishing the tender required Minister of Culture Arifhikmet Xhemaili, a member of junior government coalition partner DPA (ethnic Albanian), to sign the decision. Casting doubt on whether the government move enjoyed DPA support, Xhemaili was notably absent for several days following the decision, and apparently was unwilling to have his name associated with the initiative. Deputy Minister Slobodan Despotovski eventually signed the decision on January 29th, allowing the tender to move forward. The Ministry of Culture also established a working committee responsible for selecting the best bid and for ensuring the winning contractor starts construction this summer. The committee notably lacks guidelines on budgetary limits for the project, which has raised local media concerns.

A Church for Me, a Mosque for You

¶4. (SBU) In another closed-door cabinet meeting just a week after the January 22 decision to construct the church in the city square, the government supported a DPA initiative to fund the reconstruction of the Charsia Mosque in the mostly ethnic Albanian city of Tetovo, about 25 miles from Skopje. Following the government's decision on the church, the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM) further complicated the picture, lobbying for equitable funding for reconstruction of the historic Burmali Mosque, just across the Skopje city square from the site planned for the church. Despite the ICM's ties to DPA, it appears that the government preferred to offer funding for the reconstruction of the mosque in Tetovo as a concession to DPA for its tacit support of the church construction. The Head of the ICM eventually welcomed the government's decision on the Tetovo mosque, despite his earlier hopes for a reconstructed Burmali Mosque.

A Little Secularism, Please

¶5. (U) Political and civic leaders, as well as media commentators, have sharply criticized the government decisions, expressing concerns about preserving secularism in Macedonia and about the budgetary impact of the moves. In a recent poll, editors of Macedonia's largest print and electronic media outlets called the government's decision to fund the construction of the church in the city square the "bleakest" event of January, citing concerns about the anti-secularist move and criticizing the government's failure "to offer any information to the public, to reveal any data on the financial costs, or to explain the need for such an object."

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¶6. (SBU) Opposition leaders, most notably from the largest ethnic Albanian party DUI, are exploiting the behind-closed-doors decision for political benefit at a time when talk of early elections dominates the political airwaves. DUI has openly critiqued Minister of Culture Xhemaili for giving DPA's tacit support for the decision on the church and has drafted, but not tabled, a no-confidence measure against the minister.

¶7. (SBU) While some opposition leaders are hoping to reap political benefits from criticizing the government's decision, others, both ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian, are genuinely worried about what these government decisions might signal. In a recent discussion with POLOFFS, DUI VP Teuta Arifi indicated that she is strongly opposed to government funding of churches or/or mosques, and is lobbying her colleagues in parliament to oppose the construction plans. She also has written editorials critical of the anti-secularist decisions. Other opposition leaders, including from SDSM and the Liberal Democratic Party, have criticized the government not only for abandoning constitutionally-mandated secularism, but also for being out-of-touch with key budget priorities in a country with extremely high unemployment and poverty rates.

Secularist Voices: Talking to the Pope about Mother Teresa

¶8. (U) The ethnic Albanian NGO "Wake Up," which has close ties to DUI, opposes the church construction on a site that is clearly marked as the location of Mother Teresa's childhood home. It has recommended instead that a replica of Mother Teresa's home be built on the site. Wake Up activists claim that two previous government budgets included funding for such a memorial to be built at that location. The organization remains firm in its position that government funding for the construction of either churches or the mosques is unconstitutional, and would cause strife among Macedonia's ethnic and religious groups. The group held a

small, peaceful protest to express that view in the city square on February 9th.

¶19. (U) Wake Up's proposal for the memorial house also is being used in the political debate between ethnic Albanian parties DUI and DPA. DUI used the issue of Mother Teresa's memorial home as the basis for a letter to Pope Benedict XVI asking him to "show support and solidarity for our initiative aimed at preventing the religious tensions that would emerge from the construction of this Orthodox religious building, which will also...disrespect the actual existence of the Catholic tradition in Macedonia."

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The GOM decisions to fund construction of a church in the Skopje city square and a mosque in Tetovo have generated strong opposition on several fronts. While some parties are benefiting from political gamesmanship on the issue, others are genuinely concerned that the decisions could signal a move away from secularism in a country where ethnic and religious issues are delicately balanced. It seems unlikely, however, that political and civic opposition will succeed in stopping government funding for the projects given the Prime Minister's personal determination to proceed. Currently enjoying strong approval ratings, the government is more likely to push to include the extra-constitutional and anti-secularist projects in its list of "accomplishments" before moving toward likely early elections following the NATO summit in April. End comment.

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